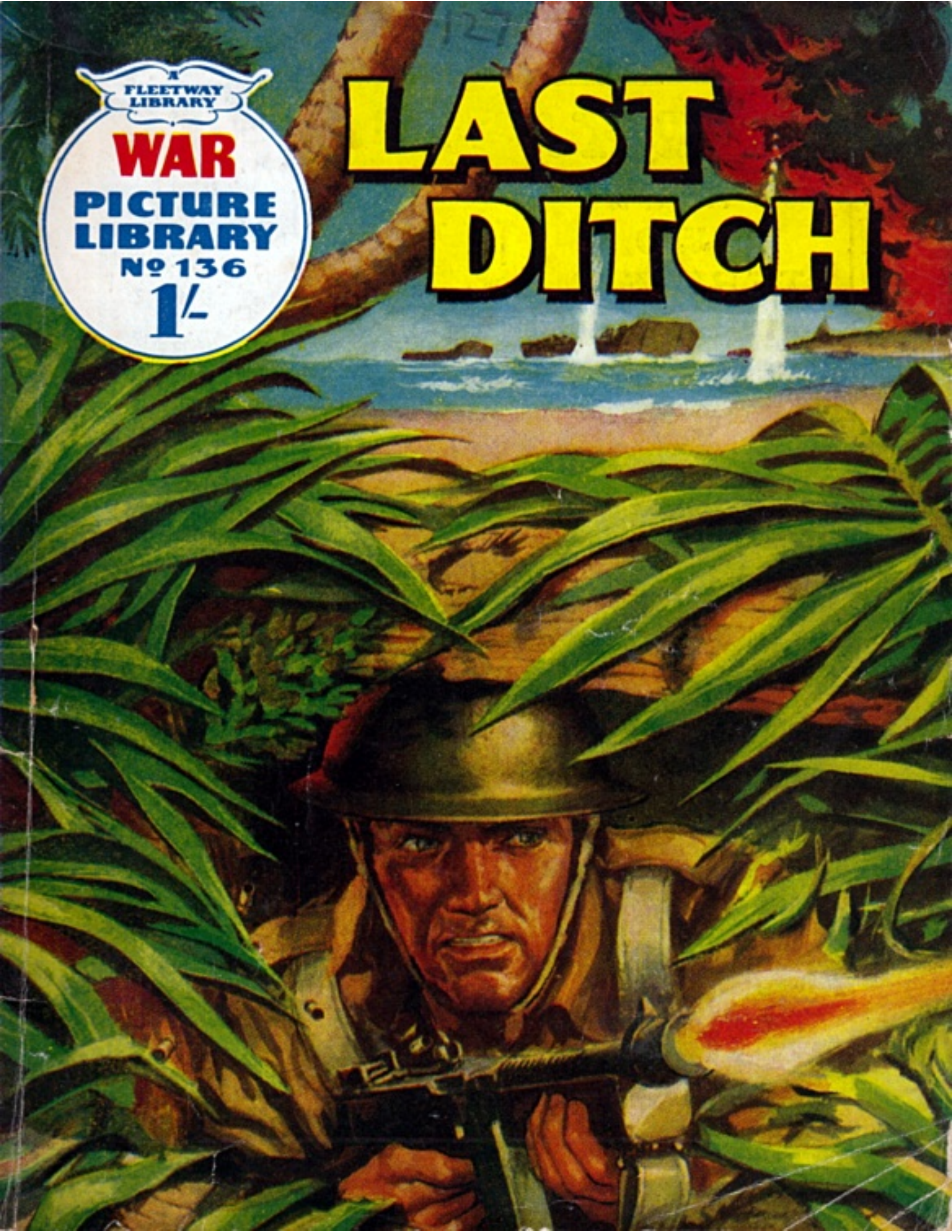


LAST DITCH



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LAST DITCH

WHEN SINGAPORE SURRENDERED IN FEBRUARY, 1942, THE INVADING JAPANESE HORDE THRUST NORTHWARDS. RANGOON FELL—AND SHATTERED REMNANTS OF THE BRITISH ARMY WITHDREW UP THE RAILWAY TO MANDALAY, UNTIL THE FLANKING JAPANESE STRUCK AT LASHIO AND CUT THE BURMA ROAD.



Chapter 1. Jap Strike

A BATTERY OF FIELD ARTILLERY, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER COMMANDING, HAD BEEN GARRISONED SINCE THE START OF THE WAR AT MYINGYAN, WHERE THE CHINDWIN RIVER FLOWS INTO THE IRRRAWADDY. THIS LONELY, ALMOST FORGOTTEN OUTPOST WAS ABOUT TO BE CAUGHT UP IN THE HOLOCAUST OF WAR...



THE CAPTAIN, A REGULAR IN THE INDIAN ARMY, WAS TOO OBSESSED BY MILITARY RITUAL TO ADMIT THAT A STATE OF EMERGENCY EXISTED.



AT THAT MOMENT, THE CAPTAIN'S PARADE WAS RUDELY INTERRUPTED... AS A GAUNT, RAGGED FIGURE STEERED AN ERRATIC COURSE ACROSS THE PARADE GROUND.



CHINDWIN CHARLIE, THE LOCAL DERELICT, WAS THE BANE OF CAPTAIN WINCHESTER'S LIFE.



SINGING LUSTILY, CHARLIE LURCHED UP TO THE CAPTAIN AND THRUST HIS CATCH UNDER HIS NOSE. CAPTAIN WINCHESTER WAS NOT AMUSED.



THE TOUGH SERGEANT HUGHES HAD A SOFT SPOT FOR CHINDWIN CHARLIE. HIS OFF-DUTY HOURS HAD OFTEN BEEN SPENT ABOARD CHARLIE'S BATTERED OLD RIVER-BOAT.



ONCE CHARLIE HAD BEEN MASTER OF AN OCEAN-GOING VESSEL - TILL HE RAN HER AGROUND. NOW HE EKEED OUT A LIVING FISHING THE CHINDWIN.



SERGEANT HUGHES WAS THE ONLY FRIEND CHARLIE HAD. WAS IT PITY—OR DID THE BURLY SERGEANT SENSE SOMETHING OF THE UNDERLYING TOUGHNESS BENEATH THE PITIABLE EXTERIOR OF THE DECREPIT OLD SAILOR?



YOU'RE OKAY, SARGE... THE ONLY BLOKE HEREABOUTS TO HELP OLD CHARLIE...

STOW IT, CHARLIE! WHEN YOU'VE SLEPT OFF THIS JAG, DO ME A FAVOUR—KEEP AWAY FROM THE CAPTAIN!

HUGHES LOOKED DOWN WITH PITY AT THE WASTED BODY SPRAWLED ON THE BED... THEN SQUARED HIS MASSIVE SHOULDERS AND MARCHED BACK TO THE BATTERY



MAYBE IT'S AS WELL THE JAPS ARE COMING. THE CAPTAIN'LL HAVE SOMETHING ELSE ON HIS MIND BESIDES A POOR OLD MAN DOWN ON HIS LUCK!

BUT THERE WAS NO PITY IN CAPTAIN WINCHESTER AS HE JOINED HIS LIEUTENANT ON THE VERANDAH OF THE OFFICERS' MESS.

BY GAD, THE FELLOW'S A DISGRACE TO THE OLD COUNTRY... IT'S FATAL TO DRINK BEFORE SUNDOWN IN THIS CLIMATE, DYCE.

I AGREE, SIR. IT'S A PITY SOMETHING CAN'T BE DONE.



LIEUTENANT BOB DYCE WAS YOUNG AND FRESH OUT OF SANDHURST. TO HIM, THE CAPTAIN WAS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A REGULAR ARMY OFFICER.

HAVE YOU SEEN THAT FILTHY SHACK HE LIVES IN? FELLOW OUGHT TO BE RUN OUT OF TOWN.

YOU'RE RIGHT, SIR!



CAPTAIN WINCHESTER HAD NO THOUGHT FOR THE RAPIDLY ADVANCING JAPANESE AS HE BROODED ON HIS PRIVATE WAR WITH CHINDWIN (CHARLIE)...

I'VE A GOOD MIND TO BURN HIS DIRTY HOVEL TO THE GROUND... DRIVE HIM OUT OF MYINGYAN. NO ONE COULD BLAME ME IF I DID!



... BUT THE JAPS WERE INTERESTED IN THE BATTERY AT MYINGYAN. AN ADVANCE PATROL HAD ALREADY REACHED THE FAR BANK OF THE RIVER. [REDACTED]



ALL THROUGH THE LONG HOURS OF DARKNESS, THE JAP BUILD-UP WENT ON. TROOPS, ARTILLERY AND ASSAULT CRAFT MOVED SILENTLY INTO POSITION.



THEN, AS A LURID DAWN BROKE OVER MYINGYAN, A STARTLED BRITISH SENTRY SHOUTED THE ALARM...



JERKED ROUGHLY OUT OF HIS SLEEP, SERGEANT HUGHES RACED TOWARDS THE GUNS, BELLOWING ORDERS AS HE WENT...



THE PEACEFUL DAWN WAS SHATTERED BY THE CHATTER OF "WOODPECKER" MACHINE-GUNS AND THE SHRILL YELLS OF THE JAPS. RED TRACER BULLETS STREAKED LOW ACROSS THE WATER.



THE BRITISH GUNNERS RAMMED SHELLS INTO SMOKING BREECHES. BREECH-BLOCKS SLAMMED HOME... AND THE BRITISH HOWITZERS ROARED DEFIANCE AT THE ENEMY.



THE SWEATING GUNNERS FIRED, RELOADED AND FIRED AGAIN. ACRID SMOKE WREATHED AROUND THE SNARLING HOWITZERS. ABOVE THE DEAFENING BLAST, THE VOICE OF SERGEANT HUGHES BOOMED ENCOURAGEMENT.



A DIRECT HIT BLASTED THE LEADING JAP ASSAULT CRAFT OUT OF THE WATER... JUNGLE-GREEN CLAD JAPS WERE THROWN INTO THE MUDDY YELLOW RIVER...



CAPTAIN WINCHESTER, LATE IN REACHING THE BATTERY, SEEMED UNABLE TO BELIEVE HIS EYES. LIKE A MAN IN A NIGHTMARE, HE STARED AT THE STEADILY ADVANCING BOATS...



FOR YOUNG LIEUTENANT DYCE, THIS WAS THE FIRST TASTE OF BATTLE. KEEN TO HIT THE ENEMY, HE SNATCHED UP A BREN GUN AND FIRED A LONG SAVAGE BURST.



LIEUTENANT BOB DYCE HAD SPOKEN TOO SOON... A SQUADRON OF TWIN-ENGINEED MITSUBISHI BOMBERS SWOOPED MENACINGLY OUT OF THE EARLY MORNING SUN.



BOMBS CRASHED DOWN IN ONE TERRIFYING BLAST OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE, ENVELOPING THE BATTERY IN AN INFERNO OF FLAME AND FLYING METAL.



NOW THE JAPANESE ARTILLERY OPENED FIRE FROM THE FAR BANK, BLANKETING MYINGYAN WITH A DELUGE OF SHELLS. THE WOODEN-FRAME BUILDINGS BURNT FURIOUSLY AND A PLUME OF BLACK SMOKE BILLOWED SKYWARDS.



CAPTAIN WINCHESTER FELT HIS WORLD CRUMBLING AROUND HIM. THE SERENE WHITE HALLS OF NEW DELHI, HEAD-QUARTERS OF THE INDIAN ARMY, SEEMED SUDDENLY REMOTE, DISTANT FROM THE GRIM REALITIES OF WAR...



BUT THE JAPS WERE STILL FORCING THEIR WAY ACROSS THE RIVER. THEIR ASSAULT BOATS BEACHED. SCREAMING THEIR FRENZIED WAR-CRIES, THEY ADVANCED FOR THE KILL.



OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED, THE SMALL BATTERY HAD BEEN ALMOST WIPED OUT. THE FEW SURVIVORS WERE DRIVEN BACK YARD BY YARD, AS MYINGYAN BURNED. SERGEANT HUGHES, LAMED BY A STEEL SPLINTER, LIMPED PAINFULLY.



UNDER FIRE FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOUNG BOB DYCE KEPT A COOL HEAD, AND IT WAS HE WHO HAD AN INSPIRATION...

THE OLD RIVER-BOAT, SIR - IT'S OUR LAST CHANCE OF GETTING AWAY NOW!

YES YES, YOU'RE RIGHT, DYCE. WE'LL COMMANDEER IT...



SERGEANT HUGHES GRINNED FIERCELY TO HIMSELF. THIS WAS A STRANGELY IRONICAL POSITION... NOW THE CAPTAIN NEEDED CHARLIE!

CHARLIE MIGHT NOT BE TOO KEEN ON THE IDEA, SIR. I SUGGEST YOU LET ME TALK TO HIM.

GOOD IDEA, SERGEANT!

NONSENSE! I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE HIS TYPE!



CHINDWIN CHARLIE WOKE LIKE A BEAR WITH A SORE HEAD — AND THE VIOLENT CONCUSSION OF DISTANT BATTLE ONLY AGGRAVATED HIS HANG-OVER.



CHARLIE'S ONLY LOVE, THE *CHINDWIN MAID*, WAS AN ANCIENT OIL-BURNER, FLAT-BOTTOMED AND CAPABLE OF SIX KNOTS AGAINST THE CURRENT.



CHARLIE GLARED DOWN AT THE CAPTAIN, AND SNORTED DERISIVELY.

DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE A NAVY MAN, CAP'N! FIGURE YOU CAN HANDLE THE MAID TWO HUNDRED MILES, IN LOW WATER AND SHIFTING SAND-BANKS?

VERY WELL, WE'LL LEAVE YOU TO RUN THE BOAT - BUT I INSIST WE LEAVE AT ONCE.

YOU'VE GOT A HOPE, MATEY! YOU'RE NOT SETTING FOOT ON MY SHIP. YOU CAN BLOOMIN' WELL WALK OUT OF BURMA!

LEUTENANT DYCE TRIED TO REASON WITH CHARLIE, BUT HE HAD NO SUCCESS. THEN THE STUBBORN OLD MAN SUDDENLY NOTICED SERGEANT HUGHES TOPPLE WEAKLY TO THE GROUND.

THE JAPS ARE HERE, MAN! D'YOU WANT TO STAY AND BE KILLED?

THE JAPS DON'T SCARE ME! HEY, WHAT'S UP WITH THE SERGEANT?

CHARLIE COUNTED THE SERGEANT HIS ONLY FRIEND... THE LIEUTENANT SENSED THAT THIS WAS THE ONE WAY TO SHIFT THE RELUCTANT SKIPPER...



CHINDWIN CHARLIE GRUMBLED BAD-TEMPEREDLY TO HIMSELF AS HE MADE UP HIS MIND...

ALL RIGHT / I'M TAKING THE SARGE OUT... SO YOU TWO SWABS MIGHT AS WELL COME FOR THE RIDE...

THANKS, CHARLIE.



BUT THE BATTERED OLD RIVER-BOAT HAD TO BE MADE READY—AND TIME WAS CRITICALLY SHORT WITH THE JAPS CLOSING IN. EVERY MINUTE'S DELAY INCREASED THEIR DANGER.

TAKE IT EASY, SERGEANT.

BETTER GRAB ALL THE FOOD AND AMMO YOU CAN LAY HANDS ON, CAP'N, WHILE I'M HUMPING THE FUEL DRUMS ABOARD.


SOMEHOW THE JOB WAS DONE. THE MAID WAS READY TO SAIL WHEN AN ENEMY PATROL REACHED THE RIVER BANK.

AYEE!
KILL THE WHITE DEVILS!

JAPS!


LOOK LIVELY,
YOU LANDLUBBERS—
LET'S BE OFF!

A HAIL OF RIFLE BULLETS LASHED THE RIVER-BOAT... THEN THE BREN IN BOB DYCE'S CAPABLE HANDS HAMMERED MURDEROUSLY BACK AND THE JAPS SCATTERED IN PANIC.



THAT'S THE STUFF, LIEUTENANT— GIVE IT 'EM!

THERE WAS A GLINT IN THE FADED EYES OF CHINDWIN CHARLIE AS HE GRIPPED THE WHEEL. HE STRAIGHTENED UP, SQUARED HIS SHOULDERS. HE HAD A MAN'S JOB AGAIN. THE OLD SEA-DOG WAS ACTUALLY ENJOYING HIMSELF...



I'LL SHOW THOSE ARMY WALLAHS! IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME— WHEN THEY MAKE A MUCK OF THINGS, THE NAVY HAS TO PULL 'EM OUT!

AS THE *MAID* SLID INTO MIDSTREAM, JAP ARTILLERY OPENED FIRE FROM THE OPPOSITE BANK. A SALVO OF SHELLS SHRIEKED OVERHEAD... A HUGE WATER-SPOUT BROKE IN A DELUGE ACROSS HER ANCIENT BOWS.



BUT THE *MAID* RIGHTED HERSELF AND SLOWLY HEADED INTO THE MOUTH OF THE CHINDWIN RIVER, CARRYING THE LAST SURVIVORS OUT OF MYINGYAN, ON A HAZARDOUS VOYAGE TO FREEDOM.



Chapter 2. *Escape Route*

THE CHINDWIN MAID CHUGGED UPRIVER UNDER A BLAZING TROPICAL SUN. BETWEEN DENSE-PACKED BAMBOO AND MANGROVE, THE LONG VOYAGE TO KALEWA, THROUGH JAP-INFESTED TERRITORY, HAD BEGUN...



AS THE IMMEDIATE THREAT FROM ENEMY GUNS RECEDED, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER RECOVERED HIS COMPOSURE. HE FELT IT WAS TIME TO ASSERT HIS AUTHORITY AGAIN.



CHARLIE'S TEMPER FLARED UP AT CAPTAIN WINCHESTER'S HIGH-HANDED ATTITUDE



THE CALCULATED INSULT WAS LIKE LIGHTING A FUSE TO A BOMB. CHINDWIN CHARLIE EXPLODED, EYES BLAZING... BUT THE CAPTAIN INTERRUPTED HIM CURTLY.



THE MAID'S CABIN SUITED CHARLIE WELL ENOUGH... BUT THE SNOBBISH CAPTAIN WINCHESTER SNIFFED IN DISGUST AT THE BOTTLE-LITTERED INTERIOR.



IN A CLIPPED MATTER-OF-FACT TONE, AND TAKING NO ACCOUNT OF HIS PRESENT EXTRAORDINARY POSITION, THE CAPTAIN LAID DOWN PROCEDURE.



ON DECK, SERGEANT HUGHES DID HIS BEST TO CALM THE OLD SEA-DOG BUT CHINDWIN CHARLIE CURSED BITTERLY AND STEADILY...

TAKE IT EASY, CHARLIE! WE'RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT TOGETHER!

ANY MORE LIP FROM THAT JUMPED-UP JACKASS, AND I'LL DUMP HIM OVERBOARD! BUT DON'T YOU WORRY, SARGE... I'LL GET YOU BACK!

BUT EVEN AS THE SERGEANT WENT FOR'ARD, CHARLIE SMACKED DRY LIPS... AND REACHED DOWN INTO THE WELL OF THE BOAT FOR A BOTTLE.

TO HECK WITH THE CAP'N! A QUICK SNORT WON'T HURT ME!



BROODING, HIS FEELINGS HURT BY THE CAPTAIN'S INSULT, CHARLIE DRANK GREEDILY... EVEN AS THE CHINDWIN MAID NOSED IN AMONG THE PERILOUS SHOALS OF SAND.



ONCE STARTED CHARLIE COULD NOT LEAVE THE BOTTLE ALONE. HIS HANDS SLACKENED ON THE WHEEL... EYES GLAZED, HE STUMBLED BACK, LEAVING THE WHEEL TO SPIN FREE...



IN THE FOREPEAK, SERGEANT HUGHES WATCHED HORRIFIED AS THE BLUNT BOWS OF THE MAID PLOUGHED INTO DEEP SAND. THE SCREW THRASHED IDLY. THE OLD RIVER-BOAT WAS STUCK FAST.



ROUSED BY THE SERGEANT'S STRIDENT VOICE, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER BURST OUT OF THE CABIN. HE STARED DOWN AT THE SPRAWLING, SNORING FIGURE OF CHINDWIN CHARLIE AND HIS LIPS TIGHTENED GRIMLY.



IT'S
A POOR
SHOW,
SIR!

I KNEW THIS
WOULD HAPPEN...
I SHOULD NEVER
HAVE TRUSTED
THE DRUNKEN
FOOL!

UNNOTICED BY THE MEN ABOARD THE MAID, INTENT ON THEIR OWN LITTLE DRAMA, THE TALL-KUNAI GRASS AT THE EDGE OF THE RIVER SLOWLY PARTED...



SO! MORE
OF THE BRITISH
DOGS! FORWARD,
MY MEN, WE WILL CUT
DOWN THE ENEMIES
OF THE EMPEROR!

A GREEN CLAD JAP PATROL SNEAKED OUT OF THE JUNGLE AND WADED INTO THE SHALLOW WATERS OF THE CHINDWIN. SILENTLY, THEY CROSSED THE SANDBANK, CREEPING UP ON THEIR UNSUSPECTING PREY.



WITHOUT WARNING, THE FANATICAL JAPS STRUCK, SWARMING ABOARD THE MAID. A MUSCULAR ARM TIGHTENED ROUND THE CAPTAIN'S THROAT...



QUICK-THINKING BOB DYCE SAVED THE CAPTAIN'S LIFE WITH A SNAP-SHOT. THE FIGHTING WAS BITTER, HAND-TO-HAND, WITH NO QUARTER GIVEN...



BUT HUGHES, TOUGH VETERAN THOUGH HE WAS, HAD HIS HANDS FULL. SWINGING HIS STEN AS A CLUB, HE BROKE FREE AT LAST...



HE HURLED HIMSELF HEADLONG FOR THE BREN, TURNING THE MUZZLE ON THE MEN STILL IN THE WATER. HIS FINGER CLAWED ROUND THE TRIGGER AND NICKEL-JACKETED BULLETS RIPPED INTO THE JAP RANKS.



WHILE THE BATTLE RAGED ABOUT HIM, CHINDWIN CHARLIE LAY OBLIVIOUS, DREAMING HAPPILY OF OTHER SHIPS AND BETTER TIMES...



THE RINGING CLASH OF COLD STEEL WAS PUNCTURED BY THE CHATTER OF HUGHES' BREN AND THE STACCATO BARK OF THE CAPTAIN'S REVOLVER.

GOOD WORK, DYCE!



ATTACKING WITH SUICIDAL STUBBORNNESS, THE JAPS FOUGHT TO THE BITTER END.

THAT WAS TOUGH, SIR! WE'D BETTER GET OFF THIS BANK BEFORE THEIR PALS TURN UP.

THERE'S ONE THING I HAVE TO DO FIRST...



THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS CAPTAIN WINCHESTER WAS NOW MORE THAN EVER CONVINCED THAT CHINDWIN CHARLIE WAS COMPLETELY USELESS, A CHRONIC DRUNKARD WHO MUST BE CURBED FOR HIS OWN GOOD.

I'LL MAKE CERTAIN THERE'LL BE NO REPETITION OF THIS DISGRACEFUL INCIDENT!



IT WAS BOB DYCE WHO GOT THE MAID MOVING AGAIN. WHILE CHARLIE SNORED, THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT STRUGGLED TO LEARN BY TRIAL AND ERROR HOW TO HANDLE THE OLD RIVER-BOAT.

LUCKY I DID A BIT OF SAILING AT COWES, SIR. I'M GETTING THE FEEL OF THIS OLD TUB NOW!



AS DARKNESS DROPPED LIKE A SHROUD OVER THE JUNGLE, LIEUTENANT DYCE EDGED THE MAID CLOSE TO THE RIVER BANK AND MOORED FOR THE NIGHT.

IT'S TOO RISKY TO PUSH ON IN THE DARK, SIR. I DON'T KNOW THE RIVER LIKE CHARLIE. WE'LL HAVE TO WAIT FOR SUNRISE —

OR UNTIL THE WRETCHED FELLOW WAKES UP!

WHEN CHARLIE FINALLY ROUSED, A STEAM-HAMMER POUNDED IN HIS BRAIN AND SPLINTERS OF LIGHT STABBED AT HIS EYE-BALLS. THE CAPTAIN WAS READY FOR HIM...

LISTEN TO ME! I'VE THROWN EVERY BOTTLE OVER THE SIDE... I WANT NO MORE TROUBLE FROM YOU. BY GAD, IF YOU WERE AN ARMY MAN, I'D HAVE YOU COURT-MARTIALLED FOR GROSS DERELICTION OF DUTY!

TO THE CAPTAIN'S SURPRISE, CHINDWIN CHARLIE APPEARED COMPLETELY SUBDUED... THE OLD SEA-DOG HASTENED TO AGREE WITH HIM.

YOU'RE RIGHT, CAPT'N! IT WASN'T THE TIME TO SPLICE THE MAINBRACE / YOU DID THE RIGHT THING, REMOVING TEMPTATION... DON'T YOU FRET, SIR, I'LL GET YOU THROUGH TO KALEWA.



FOR'ARD, IN THE FOREPEAK, THE OLD MAN WAS SHAMEFACED AS HE SPOKE TO SERGEANT HUGHES.

SORRY, SARGE... GUESS I LET YOU DOWN. IT WAS MY FAULT—THE JAPS NEARLY COPPED THE LOT OF US. I'M JUST A STUPID OLD FOOL...



FORGET IT, CHARLIE. WE'LL SURVIVE!

LIEUTENANT BOB DYCE DEEPLY RESENTED BEING KICKED OUT OF BURMA BY THE JAPS. HE WANTED TO HIT BACK... AND HE THOUGHT HE SAW HIS CHANCE.

I BELIEVE WE'RE CLOSE TO MONYWA, SIR. THE NORTHBOUND RAILWAY GOES THROUGH THERE, AND THE JAPS COULD USE THAT LINE TO CUT OFF OUR TROOPS WITHDRAWING ACROSS THE IRRAWADDY.





IF WE DESTROYED
THE RAILWAY TRACK, OUR
MEN WOULD HAVE A BETTER
CHANCE TO BREAK OUT. I THINK
WE OUGHT TO MAKE THE ATTEMPT—
IT MIGHT SAVE THOUSANDS
OF MEN!

BUT THE CAPTAIN WANTED NO PART
OF HIS IDEA. LIEUTENANT DYCE WAS
ASTONISHED. HE HAD NEVER SEEN
HIS SUPERIOR SO AGITATED BEFORE.



NO, DYCE!
I CAN'T ALLOW
IT... I HAVE NO FAITH
IN THESE CLOAK AND
DAGGER ACTIVITIES.
OUR DUTY IS TO
REJOIN THE DIVISION.
AT IMPHAL...

BUT, SIR—

CAPTAIN WINCHESTER CURTLY OVER-ruLED HIS LIEUTENANT... AND SO, AT FIRST LIGHT, THE CHINDWIN MAID FORGED UPRIVER ON HER PERILOUS JOURNEY NORTH...



SERGEANT HUGHES, CROUCHED IN THE FOREPEAK WITH THE BREN GUN, HAD ALSO SPOTTED SIGNS THAT THE SMALL RIVER PORT WAS ALREADY IN JAPANESE HANDS. IT WAS CLEAR THEY WOULD HAVE TO RUN THE GAUNTLET.



THE JAP LAUNCH CAME AT THE MAID LIKE AN ARROW, A HEAVY JUKI MACHINE-GUN SPITTING LEAD. RED TRACER KNIFED THE AIR. SERGEANT HUGHES, FLAT BEHIND THE BREN, SCYTHED A LONG BURST INTO THE ENEMY HULL.

HIT 'EM
BELOW THE
WATER-LINE,
SARGE!

AYEE!
KILL THE
ENGLISH
DEVILS!

THE FIRST NAVAL ENCOUNTER ON THE CHINDWIN WAS BRIEF. AS BULLETS SLAMMED PAST HIM, BOB DYCE YANKED THE SAFETY-PIN FROM A GRENADE...

LET'S SEE
HOW YOU
LIKE THIS!

BOB HURLED THE GRENADE WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH. IT FELL STRAIGHT INTO THE JAP LAUNCH, BLASTING THE BOTTOM OUT OF IT.



AS THE GUNS OF MONYWA DROPPED AWAY BEHIND THE OLD RIVER-BOAT, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER WAS FEELING PLEASED WITH HIMSELF. HE CONSIDERED HIS DECISION VINDICATED.

YOU SEE, DYCE, I WAS RIGHT. MONYWA IS STRONGLY HELD BY THE ENEMY—JUST AS WELL WE DIDN'T INDULGE IN THAT LITTLE ESCAPE OF YOURS...



BOB DYCE DID NOT REPLY. HE FOCUSED HIS BINOCULARS ON THE SINGLE TRACK RAILWAY LINE... AS HE HAD ANTICIPATED, JAP REINFORCEMENTS WERE MOVING UP NORTH TO CUT THE BRITISH LINE OF RETREAT FROM LASHIO.



WHEN HE FINALLY LOWERED THE GLASSES, HE TURNED TO LOOK AT HIS CAPTAIN WITH A STEADY, UNWAVERING GAZE. HIS VOICE HAD A NOTE OF RAW BITTERNESS.



I STILL WISH WE'D TRIED, SIR. UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS IT COULD HAVE WORKED, AND A LOT OF OUR MEN MAY DIE BECAUSE WE DID NOTHING.

THE CAPTAIN FLUSHED UNEASILY. PERHAPS HIS CONSCIENCE BOTHERED HIM FOR A MOMENT, BUT HE QUICKLY REGAINED CONFIDENCE AND SPOKE REASSURINGLY.



NONSENSE!
YOU'LL LOOK AT IT
DIFFERENTLY WHEN WE GET
BACK TO IMPHAL. AN ARMY
NEEDS OVERALL STRATEGY,
LINES OF COMMUNICATION,
TRANSPORT...

THIS ISN'T
JUST ANOTHER
EXERCISE, SIR. IT'S
AN ALL-OUT WAR!
WE'RE SUPPOSED TO
BE FIGHTING THE
JAPS!

LIEUTENANT BOB DYCE STARED AFTER HIS CAPTAIN. A TINY SEED OF DOUBT WAS GROWING IN HIS MIND...



SURELY THE CAPTAIN
DIDN'T REFUSE TO ATTACK
TO SAVE HIS OWN SKIN?

Chapter 3. *Jungle Showdown*

ENGINE POUNDING MONOTONOUSLY, THE *CHINDWIN MAID* PLOUGHED DOGGEDLY ON THROUGH THE DANK, TROPIC HEAT OF THE BURMESE JUNGLE. THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS VOYAGE WAS BEGINNING TO FRAY CAPTAIN WINCHESTER'S NERVES.

I'LL BE GLAD TO SEE THE LAST OF THIS STINKING TUB—AND THAT OLD MAN. BY JOVE, IT'LL BE GOOD TO REACH INDIA AND LIVE DECENTLY AGAIN!

BOB DYCE WAS THINKING OF THE MEN ATTEMPTING THE JOURNEY ON FOOT... BUT THE CAPTAIN DID NOT SEEM TO NOTICE THE SHARPNESS IN HIS VOICE.

WE'RE LUCKY TO GET FRESH FISH. THINK OF THE MEN FOOTSLOGGING IT THROUGH THE BUSH. WE'VE GOT IT EASY!

I DARE SAY YOU'RE RIGHT, DYCE... BUT I'D GIVE ANYTHING FOR A LONG COOL DRINK RIGHT NOW!

THE TRIP WAS HAVING A TOTALLY DIFFERENT EFFECT ON CHINDWIN CHARLIE. THERE WAS NEW VITALITY IN HIS EYES... HE SEEMED TO HAVE REGAINED SOME OF HIS OLD CONFIDENCE AND SELF-RESPECT.



BUT THEY WERE NOT OUT OF TROUBLE YET. A JAP FIGHTER PLANE ON RECONNAISSANCE SPOTTED THE *MAID* AND PEELED OFF TO ATTACK... CHARLIE, REACTING INSTINCTIVELY AS THE MASTER, RAPPED OUT A COMMAND.



THE ZERO DIVED IN A LOW-LEVEL ATTACK, MACHINE-GUNS STRAFING THE OLD RIVER-BOAT. SERGEANT HUGHES RAISED THE BREN TO HIS SHOULDER AND HAMMERED THE LEAD BACK AT THE JAP PILOT.



THE ENEMY AIRCRAFT CIRCLED AND SWOOPED AGAIN. FLAMING TRACER CRISS-CROSSED IN THE AIR. THE SERGEANT'S BULLETS SLAMMED HOME AND A TONGUE OF FLAME LICKED OUT FROM THE ZERO'S TAIL.



BY THE TIME LIEUTENANT DYCE BURST OUT OF THE CABIN, THE ACTION WAS ALREADY OVER.

A ZERO...
THAT WAS FAST.
GOOD WORK,
SERGEANT!

YOU CAN TELL THAT
LAYABOUT CAPTAIN
THERE'S NO NEED
TO STIR HIMSELF
NOW!



THE LONG HOURS DRAGGED BY UNDER A BLANKET OF STEAMING HEAT, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER LAY ON HIS BUNK AND DREAMED OF NEW DELHI... WHILE THE INDESTRUCTIBLE MAID PURSUED HER COURSE UP THE WINDING RIVER.

RECKON WE'LL
GET TO KALEWA AHEAD
OF THE MONSOON,
CHARLIE?

JUST ABOUT,
SARGE... IF WE'RE
NOT HELD UP.



UNKNOWN TO THOSE ABOARD THE RIVER-BOAT, A GREATER THREAT THAN THE WET MONSOON LAY IN WAIT FOR THEM. ON A TINY ISLET IN THE CHINDWIN...

SPEAK, YOU BURMESE DOG! WHERE IS THE EXPLOSIVE HIDDEN? MUST I USE FORCE TO LOOSEN YOUR TONGUE?



THE PRISONER REFUSED TO SPEAK... AND, AT THAT MOMENT, THE RADIO FLASHED AN URGENT SIGNAL. SCOWLING, THE JAPANESE COMMANDER ANSWERED THE CALL.



YES, I UNDERSTAND, COLONEL OKASIMA. WE WILL SINK THE ENGLISHMAN'S VESSEL... PREPARE THE MORTAR!

THE LOYAL BURMESE WAS TIED TO A TREE AND FORGOTTEN AS THE JAPS SET UP THEIR THREE-INCH MORTAR.



THE FIRST MORTAR SHELL FELL SHORT. WATER ROSE IN A FOUNTAIN AND CASCADED OVER THE ANCIENT AND BATTERED RIVER-BOAT.



HALF-DROWNED BY MUDDY RIVER-WATER, CHINDWIN CHARLIE RAN THE *MAID* CLOSE TO THE ISLAND. HE BAWLED AN ANGRY VIOLENT COMMAND.



KNOCK THAT PERISHING MORTAR OUT, AND QUICK!

SERGEANT HUGHES TRAINED HIS BREN ON THE JUNGLE AMBUSH AND POURED A DEADLY STREAM OF BULLETS INTO THE LUSH GREEN FOLIAGE. THE LIEUTENANT PIN-POINTED THE ENEMY MORTAR AND HURLED A HAND-GRENADE.



THAT'S THE STUFF, SERGEANT—
GIVE 'EM
IT HOT!

THE MILLS BOMB EXPLODED ALMOST ON TOP OF THE MORTAR. STEEL SHRAPNEL HISSED THROUGH THE AIR AS BREN-GUN FIRE RAKED THE UNDERGROWTH.



THE BURMESE PRISONER SEIZED HIS CHANCE. THE TREE TO WHICH HE WAS TIED TOPPLED FROM THE BLAST OF THE GRENADE. HE BROKE FREE AND RACED FOR THE RIVER...



AS THE SLIM BROWN BODY KNIFED THROUGH THE WATER, HEADING TOWARDS THE MAID, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER TOOK CAREFUL AIM WITH HIS REVOLVER...



SMILING, THE BURMESE CLIMBED ABOARD THE BOAT. CAPTAIN WINCHESTER STARED AT HIM WITH SUSPICION IN HIS EYES...



THE BURMESE SPOKE A LITTLE ENGLISH, AND CHARLIE HAD A SMATTERING OF THE LOCAL TONGUE. THEY REACHED AN UNDERSTANDING.



AH-SONG - THAT'S HIS NAME - BURIED THE DETONATORS AND FUSE IN THE JUNGLE BEFORE THE JAPS CAUGHT HIM. HE WANTS US TO BLOW THE DUMP FOR THE MAJOR!



LIEUTENANT DYCE SHARPLY CONTRADICTED HIS SUPERIOR. THERE WAS A STUBBORN SET TO HIS MOUTH, A HARDNESS IN HIS EYES.



CAPTAIN WINCHESTER WAS NOT INTERESTED. HE SEEMED NERVOUS. HIS WORDS SNAPPED OUT - RAW AND IMPATIENT...

IMPOSSIBLE! MY DUTY IS TO GET TO IMPHAL WITH THE LEAST DELAY. AND WE CAN'T TAKE THE WORD OF A NATIVE - IT MAY WELL BE A JAPANESE TRICK!



I DON'T AGREE -

I THINK WE OUGHT TO TRY IT. WE DON'T WANT BRITISH AMMO USED AGAINST BRITISH TROOPS. YOU KNOW HOW THE JAPS WORK - RELYING ON GRABBING SUPPLIES AS THEY ADVANCE.



THE CAPTAIN LOOKED BITTER. HIS VOICE HELD A RISING NOTE OF HYSTERIA. CHARLIE TURNED FURIOUSLY ON HIM.

NO, DYCE,
I CAN'T ALLOW
IT. I'M IN
COMMAND!

YOU'RE THE ONE
WHO'S ALWAYS SHOUTING
THE ODDS ABOUT THE INDIAN
ARMY, CAP'TN. D'YOU WANT
THE BURMESE TO LOSE FAITH
IN THE BRITISH RAJ?

KEEP OUT
OF THIS - YOU'RE
A NON-COMBATANT -

NON-COMBATANT, IS IT?
MAYBE YOU'LL EXPLAIN
THAT TO THE JAPS SO
THEY'LL STOP SHOOTING
HOLES IN MY SHIP! AND
SPEAKING OF COMMAND,
I'M THE MASTER AND
THAT GIVES ME A SAY
IN THE MATTER! THE
LIEUTENANT'S MADE
HIMSELF CLEAR - HOW
ABOUT YOU, SARGE?

BUT SERGEANT HUGHES COULD NOT LOOK DIRECTLY INTO THE CAPTAIN'S EYES... PERHAPS HE WAS AFRAID OF WHAT HE MIGHT SEE THERE.

I'M WITH THE LIEUTENANT, CHARLIE. WE'VE GOT TO BLOW THAT DUMP - IF WE CAN - TO SAVE THE LIVES OF OUR LADS...



CAPTAIN WINCHESTER GLARED WILDLY ROUND AND HIS FEAR WAS A NAKED THING, CLEAR FOR ALL TO SEE...

THAT'S SETTLED, THEN. THIS HERE'S A DEMOCRACY, CAP'N - AND YOU'RE OUT-VOTED!

YOU FOOL!
YOU'LL GET
US ALL KILLED!



S HWEGYIN LAY A FEW MILES SOUTH OF KALEWA. AS THE CURTAIN OF NIGHT BLACKED OUT THE RIVER, THE CHINDWIN MAID NUDGED INTO THE MUD OF THE BANK. IGNORING CAPTAIN WINCHESTER, THE OTHERS DISCUSSED THEIR PERILOUS VENTURE...



STRANGELY IT WAS CHINDWIN CHARLIE WHO AUTOMATICALLY ASSUMED COMMAND OF THE SMALL FORCE... BUT HE WAS A CHANGED MAN FROM THE DRUNKEN OLD DERELICT WHO HAD LEFT MYINGYAN.



THE CAPTAIN MADE ONE LAST ATTEMPT TO STOP THEM GOING. HIS FACE WAS ASHEN AND HIS WORDS TUMBLED FROM TREMBLING LIPS.

YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME ALONE...THE JAPS ARE CLOSE! CALL IT OFF AND LET'S GET AWAY FROM HERE... IT'S TOO RISKY. I TELL YOU / BY HEAVENS! I-I'LL REPORT THIS... IT-IT'S MUTINY!

THERE WAS CONTEMPT IN THEIR SILENCE AS THEY TURNED AWAY TOWARDS THE DARK GREEN WALL OF THE JUNGLE.

LIEUTENANT DYCE WAS STILL DAZED BY HIS CAPTAIN'S COWARDICE AND IT WAS TO CHINDWIN CHARLIE, THE MAN HE HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO DESPISE, THAT HE TURNED FOR LEADERSHIP.

THE CAPTAIN WAS WRONG, ALL THE TIME / CHARLIE'S ALL RIGHT - HE'S A REAL MAN!

THAT NIGHT TREK THROUGH WILD, NEAR-IMPENETRABLE JUNGLE WAS AN EXPERIENCE NOT ONE OF THAT SMALL PARTY WOULD EVER FORGET - OR WISH TO REPEAT. THEY HACKED A PATH OUT OF TANGLED, MATTED CREEPERS AND DENSE UNDERGROWTH...



THEY CROSSED SEVERAL CHAUNGS - NARROW CREEKS, GREEN WITH EVIL-SMELLING SCUM. LEECHES CLUNG TO THEIR BARE FLESH... MOSQUITOES STUNG THEM LIKE POISON-DARTS.

HOW MUCH MORE
OF THIS? THIS JUNGLE'S
NO PLACE FOR AN
HONEST SAILOR!

NEARLY
THERE,
SAHIB.



AT LAST, AH-SONG LED THEM INTO A CLEARING IN THE JUNGLE, WHERE A ROUGH WOODEN CROSS UNDER A MANGROVE TREE MARKED THE GRAVE OF SOME UNKNOWN SOLDIER.

JAPS
NO THINK TO
LOOK IN GRAVE...
WE DIG THERE!

THAT'S SMART
THINKING,
AH-SONG!

THEY DUG DEEP. THERE WAS NO BODY BURIED UNDER THE CROSS BUT AN ARMY HAVERSACK. THEY LIFTED IT OUT AND OPENED IT...

THIS IS THE STUFF,
ALL RIGHT... PLASTIC
CHARGES, DETONATORS,
INSTANTANEOUS FUSE.
WE'RE IN BUSINESS!

NOW SHOW
US THIS AMMO
DUMP, AH-
SONG!

ARMED WITH EXPLOSIVES, THEY SET OFF FOR THE AMMUNITION DUMP THE MOON ROSE, CASTING AN EERIE GLOW OVER THE JUNGLE AS THEIR BURMESE GUIDE TOOK THEM ALONG AN OLD ANIMAL RUN.

YOU KNOW HOW TO USE THIS PLASTIC STUFF, SIR P

YES, SERGEANT, I KNOW...

WHERE THE JUNGLE ENDED AND THE TALL KUNAI GRASS BEGAN, THE VAST HUMP OF THE AMMUNITION DUMP STOOD OUT ON THE HORIZON, A BOLD SILHOUETTE IN THE MOONLIGHT. A JAP MACHINE-GUN POST BARRED THEIR WAY...

QUIET NOW, VERY CLOSE!

SILENTLY, SERGEANT HUGHES AND AH-SONG CRAWLED THROUGH THE WAIST-HIGH GRASS TOWARDS THE JAP POST.

THAT LOT
HAVE GOT
TO BE
SILENCED!

AS SILENTLY AS THE JUNGLE ANIMALS
THEMSELVES, THEY CREEPT UP ON THE
TWO UNWARY JAPS...



IT WAS DONE SWIFTLY BUT SURELY. LIEUTENANT DYCE HURRIED FORWARD. HE PLACED HIS CHARGES AND RAN OUT THE FUSE CABLE. THEN...

JAPS
COMING!
BETTER HURRY,
LIEUTENANT!



BULLETS WERE LASHING THE GROUND ABOUT THEM AS CHINDWIN CHARLIE SWUNG THE HEAVY JUKI MACHINE-GUN ROUND TOWARDS THE ENEMY. HE SQUEEZED THE TRIGGER...

BANZAI!
KILL THE
FOREIGN
DEVILS!

GIVE
IT TO 'EM,
SARGE.



WHILE LEAD RICOCHETED AROUND HIS HEAD, LIEUTENANT DYCE COOLLY FINISHED LAYING THE CABLE AND LIT THE FUSE. WITHERING FIRE FROM THE SERGEANT'S BREN HAD CHECKED THE FIRST WAVE OF CHARGING JAPS...



THE FUSE SPLUTTERED INTO LIFE AND THEY RACED ACROSS THE BULLET-TORN GROUND FOR THE COVER OF THE JUNGLE. BULLETS GROPED AFTER THEM AS THEY FLED...



SERGEANT HUGHES THREW HIMSELF DOWN IN THE UNDERGROWTH BESIDE THE LIEUTENANT - AND ONLY THEN REALISED CHARLIE WAS NOT WITH THEM. A LAST BURST OF MACHINE-GUN FIRE CRASHED OUT...



THE AMMUNITION DUMP EXPLODED WITH A VIOLENCE THAT ROCKED THE GROUND FOR MILES AROUND. THE JUNGLE BENT UNDER THE BLAST OF THE SHOCK WAVE...



AS THE DUST SETTLED, SERGEANT HUGHES AND LIEUTENANT DYCE LOOKED AT EACH OTHER IN HUSHED SILENCE. BOB DYCE'S WORDS WERE CHOKED...

CHARLIE STAYED
BEHIND TO MAKE SURE...
THAT TOOK REAL COURAGE...
AND I THOUGHT HE WAS
A COWARD...



IN SILENCE, THEY TREKKED BACK ALONG THE TANGLED TRAILS TO THE CHINDWIN MAID.

I GO BACK
TO FAMILY,
NOW.

THANKS, AH-SONG,
YOU DID WELL...
REMEMBER, ONE DAY,
WE'LL BE BACK!

ABOARD THE MAID, CAPTAIN WINCHESTER REGARDED THEM COLDLY. HE DID NOT SEEM TO NOTICE THAT CHINDWIN CHARLIE HAD NOT RETURNED.

SO YOU'RE
BACK AT LAST...
THAT EXPLOSION MUST
HAVE STIRRED UP EVERY
JAP FOR MILES AROUND.
WE MUST GET OUT OF
HERE IMMEDIATELY!

WITHOUT ANSWERING, LIEUTENANT DYCE STARTED THE ENGINE. HE TOOK THE BATTERED OLD RIVER-BOAT UPSTREAM...AND, A FEW HOURS LATER, BERTHED AT KALEWA.

HURRY, LIEUTENANT!
WE MUST REPORT
TO HEADQUARTERS
AT IMPHAL. IN CASE
YOU'VE FORGOTTEN,
THERE'S A WAR
ON!

THE LIEUTENANT AND THE SERGEANT IGNORED HIM. THEY HAD ONE LAST RITE TO PERFORM, SOMETHING THAT OLD SEA-DOG CHINDWIN CHARLIE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED OF THEM...

HE WOULDN'T
WANT THE JAPS
TO HAVE 'HER,
LIEUTENANT.

YOU'RE
RIGHT, SERGEANT...
THE ONLY THING IS
TO SCUTTLE HER.

THE SEA-COCKS OPENED... MUDDY WATER
POURED IN... AND THE CHINDWIN MAID
FOUND HER FINAL RESTING PLACE. SHE
NESTLED DOWN INTO THE WATERS OF THE
RIVER SHE HAD NAVIGATED SO FAITHFULLY...
TO REST IN PEACE.



THERE SHE LAY, A MEMORIAL TO THE MAN WHO
SAILED HER. THE ONLY MEMORIAL... EXCEPT
FOR THE MEMORIES OF TWO MEN WHO WOULD
NEVER FORGET CHINDWIN CHARLIE AS LONG
AS THEY LIVED.

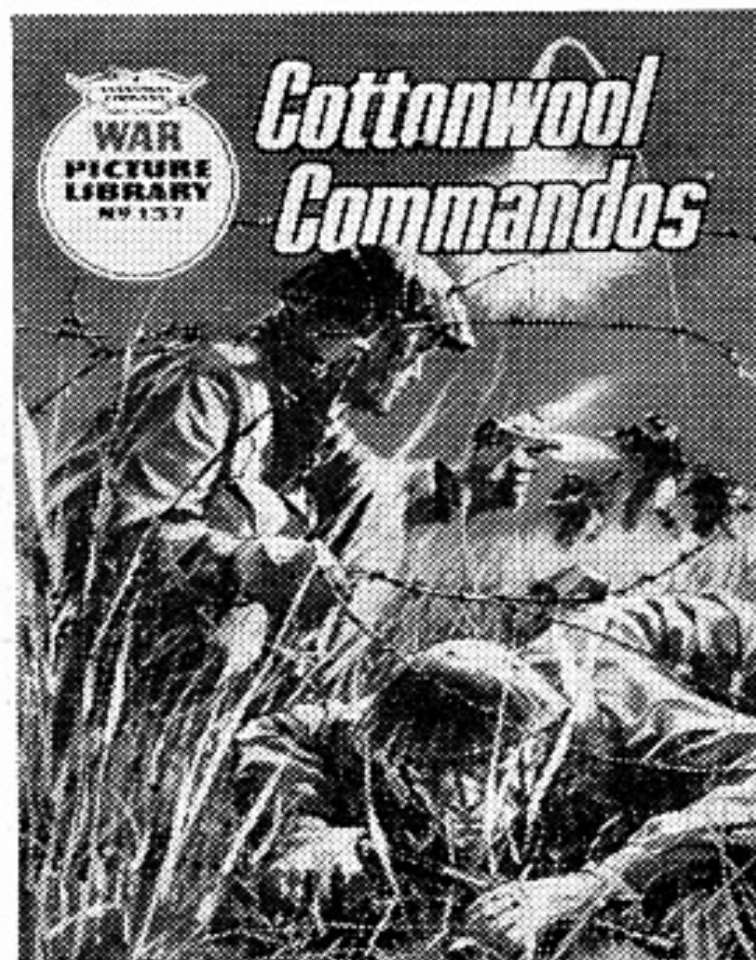
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